

## The Journey of a Correctional Officer through COVID-19

By Carina Jugloff

In the following weeks after the coronavirus was declared a national pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), media across the globe began to praise frontline workers such as health care workers, truck drivers, and even grocery store employees, but rarely was there mention of correctional officers whom put their lives at risk day in and day out. Due to the draining and confining environment of a prison COVID-19 has affected not only the correctional officer workforce, but also their families by implementing the fear of bringing the virus back home, providing the additional stressor of a changing work environment as more of inmates' privileges were taken away, as well as worsening the already sensitive state of correctional officers' mental health.

Correctional officers across Canada have had to face the harsh truth that contracting COVID-19 and bringing the virus back home to their families is a rational possibility. A single case of coronavirus acts as a spark and quickly spreads throughout the congested conditions of a prison. This became an unfortunate reality for Mission Institution, a medium-security prison in B.C., as they faced the largest prison outbreak in Canada. A CTV news article states "The coronavirus outbreak at Mission institution... began with just two positive tests on April 4, but soon ballooned to 132 total cases, including 120 inmates" (Holliday). The travesty that was embarked upon at Mission Institution is only one example of the numerous outbreaks which have occurred at Canadian prisons in the past few months. This has majorly impacted correctional officers families by instilling trepidation and fear into their everyday lives.

Not only have the families of correctional officers been affected by the rapid growth of the coronavirus, but the work environment for officers has also seen drastic changes. Along with the rest of society, prison institutes throughout Canada have implemented new regulations in response to COVID-19 including temperature checks of those entering the prison, as well as the requirement to wear face masks. However, correctional officers have experienced additional challenges with regards to controlling the growing tension and possible violence amongst inmates. For example, an inmate's rehabilitation into society typically involves the support system of their family, but [globalnews.ca](http://globalnews.ca) remarks "Visits to institutions have been suspended, as have work release programs and group education activities" (Boynton). In person visitation was shut down for approximately 4 months beginning in March. Inmates also underwent lockdowns which provided them with less recreational time outdoors. The numerous privileges that were taken away from inmates greatly impacted correctional officers as they faced new multitudes of stress in their workforce, since they had to be prepared for how COVID-19 would affect the mental stability of inmates.

Furthermore, the mental health of correctional officers has always been a cause for concern, since unlike many other occupations they are constantly surrounded by inmates who have most likely suffered through trauma at one point or another in their lifetime. COVID-19 has brought nothing but an increase in stress levels and rates of PTSD for correctional officers. Opposed to many other careers around the globe, correctional officers don't have the option to work from home and instead they must work in a confined environment with rising tension amongst inmates and the fear of catching the coronavirus. It wasn't until a few months after the outbreak occurred that "Correctional officers in Ontario... resolved a

weeks-long dispute with the government over permission to wear face masks inside provincial jails” (Casey). The fact that personal protective equipment wasn’t allowed to be worn for several weeks after the virus erupted was especially frightening for correctional officers that struggle with weakened immune systems. Correctional officers already experienced more mental health issues in comparison to the general public, but due to the unique challenges they have experienced as a result of COVID-19 these statistics have only become worse.

Overall, COVID-19 has certainly pushed essential workers to their limits, especially for correctional officers as they undergo exhausting shift work in a demanding and nerve-racking setting. The effects of the coronavirus on their families and workforce range from the frightening reality of bringing the deadly virus back to their homes, a potentially violent workplace as several of the inmates privileges are suspended, and a decline in the mental well being of correctional officers across Canada. Throughout the timeline of the global crisis known as COVID-19 countless workers were deemed as essential by society and were commended for their efforts, but it’s also important to recognize the perseverance of correctional officers as they continuously went into work each day and endured unique challenges even if it meant putting their own lives at risk.

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By Cooper Ludlow

Ontario Region Educational Bursary Submission

Deadline: September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020

***Correctional Officers are facing some unique challenges as it relates to Covid 19. What are the effects of this on the workforce and our families?***

The beginning of 2020 was a very trying time for the world, the breakout of what was believed to be an incurable virus occurred. Canada, more specifically Ontario didn't see any drastic changes until late March. Our Nation has been rocked with a situation like we've never seen before, new rules and regulations were put in place to keep everyone safe and healthy. I want to discuss how this has affected my Mother who works as a Correctional Officer and a Union Representative, changes in her workplace affected myself and my family.

At the beginning of the quarantine, I was sent home early from school. It quickly came to my attention that our household dynamic significantly changed and there was nothing I could do to help. My mother began to work from home as much as she could in regard to union work. The kitchen table became an office space and my mother could be seen on Zoom meetings for many hours a day, which has made our usually quiet household seem busier throughout the day. A Rubbermaid container sat beside our front door for dirty boots and uniforms to keep any potential virus out of our home as much as possible, with it a sense of apprehension thinking about vulnerable loved ones and the potential impact of my Mom going to work every day. As the Pandemic progressed, I could see my mother was feeling overloaded with stress as she was taken out of her comfort zone and needed to be adaptive to the changing times. As a family, the rest of us could see the wear that she began to feel.

When it comes to her day to day life at the institution, not much had changed in the beginning because the world and our country had never seen a situation so complicated before. Quickly,

like most families we became very cautious of our contact with others, making sure that we followed quarantine and isolation guidelines in order to remain healthy. I felt a sense of pressure that most may not have felt. I had to be extra careful of where I went and what I touched because if I got my mother sick and she went to work, the virus could spread like wildfire within the institution.

Since the beginning, I have seen so much support for essential workers whether it be on social media, the news or in person. My mother has had a wide range of people such as friends and family, thank her for her service during these hard times. The truth is you can not completely work from home in her occupation and people have noticed this. Even before the pandemic my Mom and her co-workers put themselves at risk each day they put on their uniforms. This whole situation has made me realize how proud I should be for her as she does a job that most could not. The job is not at all easy but with a strong union and a strong community, the hardest of challenges can be faced and beaten together. The Pandemic has proven that.

Luckily as a population we have become more knowledgeable with regards to Covid-19. We still need to be cautious and aware with the ever-changing world around us, however with cautious planning we can manage. The Rubbermaid has been put away, for now as we adapt and overcome like usual. In this paper I only discussed a few of the many challenges that Correctional Officers are going through during these unclear times.

I wish health and safety to all wearing the uniform and those who are not as we continue to face these uncertain times.

**Ontario Region UCCO-SACC CSN Education Bursary**

September 2020 by Shelby Ludlow

*Correctional Officers have an exceptionally high rate of PTSI than most other similar jobs.  
How has this affected you?*

Correctional Officers (COs) have a difficult job. While these essential workers play a pivotal role *within* the prison system, the risks that these people subject themselves to in their workplace often affect their lives *outside* of prison. Before a shift, Correctional Officers get up early in the morning and kiss their family goodbye, before heading into a gruelling 8-16 hour shift. Often, they begin the day with no idea of what lay ahead during their shift. Our parents, siblings, family and friends who take on the occupation of a Correctional Officer are required to complete various dangerous tasks at work; from stopping fights between inmates, to searching cells for weapons and protecting colleagues from harassment or assault. Each and every time these COs go to work, they expose themselves to traumatic and potentially life-threatening events. Due to the stressful and oftentimes traumatic nature of work for Correctional Officers, many COs run the risk of exposing themselves to Post Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI).

PTSI is defined by the Global Post Traumatic Stress Injury Foundation as “the experiencing or witnessing of a traumatic event that causes a biological change that affects the nervous system.” Common events that can cause PTSI include but are not limited to witnessing or experiencing overdoses, sexual assault, torture, abuse and captivity. Occupations such as Probation Officers (POs) or Pretrial Service Officers (PSOs), who also work with and around inmates, have duties and workplace risks similar in nature to that of a Correctional Officer. So, what makes a Correctional Officer more likely to develop PTSI than comparable occupations?

Simply put, it is because of the stressful environment they are consistently subjected to while at work. Correctional Officers are more likely to develop PTSI than similar occupations due to the fact that they work on the frontlines with inmates and are therefore more likely to witness or be involved in a traumatic event at work. Working as a Correctional Officer, my mother handles inmates face-to-face. These inmates within my mother’s medium-security prison have been proven guilty of



committing horrible, gruesome crimes. My mother and other Correctional Officers in the facility are required to manage these inmates and deal with all levels of altercations, searches, lockdowns, overdoses and medical emergencies.

One high-risk duty that my mother performs regularly while on shift is a cell and unit search. These searches are conducted in order to find weapons and illegal substances, such as needles, knives, razor blades and drugs. If the search is not completed properly, undetected weapons can be used to inflict injury on an inmate, and potentially a Correctional Officer. My mother could also potentially become involved in an event at work wherein a sharp weapon or object is hidden intentionally to transfer Hepatitis or HIV-AIDS. Not only does witnessing or experiencing an attack such as this cause PTSI; the psychological stress attributed to *worrying* about such an attack also contributes to PTSI.

COs work on the frontlines in prisons with inmates, and are required to be first responders to events or attacks within the prison. Therefore, these people are astronomically more likely to witness or be involved in a traumatic event at work. Stressful and dangerous workplace conditions are one of the primary reasons why a report published in 2018 by Corrections Today stated that being a Correctional Officer is considered one of the riskiest professions in the world.

An article written by *Force Science News* suggested that Corrections Officers experience PTSI symptoms at a war-zone level, meaning that the psychological stress they experience at work is comparable to that of a war veteran. Statistics today show that approximately 19% of active, working Correctional Officers suffer from PTSI. It is suspected that the true percentage of Correctional Officers suffering from PTSI is actually much higher, as many Correctional Officers suffer in silence. Due to the stigma surrounding mental health and PTSI, many workers in high-risk occupations

struggle to reach out for help. What's more concerning to me, as a daughter to a mother who works as a CO, is that the effects of PTSI are not experienced by men and women equally. According to the Global Post Traumatic Stress Injury Foundation, PTSI affects approximately 260 million people worldwide, and is much more prevalent among female-identifying Correctional Officers. According to the same study, female officers are also more likely to be subject to harassment or assault on the job, by inmates and coworkers alike.

In recent years, the TEMA conferences have begun to shed more light on PTSI and the effect it has on Correctional Officers. These conferences dive into the link between Correctional Officers and suicide as a result of suffering from occupation-related PTSI. Events such as finding a dead body, witnessing an overdose, performing CPR or being assaulted are just a few examples of situations that Correctional Officers may be subject to that could put them at risk of PTSI.

The countless statistics about workplace-related PTSIs are not nearly as moving to me in the same way my own experience as a child of a Correctional Officer is. Every day that my mother goes to work, she puts herself at greater risk of developing PTSI by working in the Corrections Facility. I think it is important that a conference like this is available for my mother and I to attend. These conferences allow Correctional Officers and their families to learn how to identify the symptoms of PTSI, where to get help and how to cope. Overall, I am thankful that my mother has worked in the Corrections Facility for over a decade and has had the support and coping mechanisms she needed to prevent her work from affecting her life. I am grateful every time my mother comes home safe. However, not every child of a Correctional Officer has had the same experience as me. It is for that reason that I believe there needs to be more information readily available for Correctional Officers and their families about the signs and symptoms of PTSI.